

HOW BIRTH EFFECTS THE REST OF YOUR LIFE

A mother who has an easy time birthing her baby will forever look into the face of her child and be reminded of an empowering experience, rather than one of excruciating pain and fear. Some have postulated that this positive beginning will sustain the family through later, more difficult times, such as during the onset of puberty.

In recent years there has been a growing awareness, on the part of people, about the importance of the first minutes, hours and days of life. Some believe that many of us unknowingly spend a good deal of our lives feeling the negative effects of and dealing with birth trauma that could have been avoided, if those who assist at birth were more knowledgeable about this issue.

There are interesting studies which show that the birth experience is one of several causal factors in determining the kind of personality an individual manifests later in life. The California Commission on Crime Control and Violence Prevention spent two years studying the root causes of crime. It found that gentle birth, more loving families and less violence on television are three major factors that curb violent crime. The Commission said that, "A positive birth experience, one that is gentle, loving and non-traumatic, increases the likelihood of healthy child development and less violent behavior."

Medical and psychological studies aside, it seems obvious that such is the case. Each of us is deeply affected on many levels by major life circumstances, which help to shape our character and personality, and birth is the first big occurrence for most of us.

Standard Childbirth In America

In recent years Americans have become over reliant on experts in every field and at every turn. Consequently, we have abrogated our responsibility and given away much of our power. Birth is a particularly good example of this. The result is often an aggressive approach and the medical management of birth, rather than a more gentle, passive approach that allows nature to take its course.

In the United States, institutionalized medicine has virtually taken over childbirth. As a result, it has created many procedures for the convenience and benefit of doctors and hospital staff, rather than for the safety and comfort of the mother and baby.

Imagine the opposite of a gentle birth; where the baby is born under stressful or insensitive conditions. The mother experiences fear and pain which transfers to the baby during labor. Then she is usually given pain medications, even if she doesn't want them. These drugs interfere with the mother's natural birthing hormones and their benefits. They are also transferred to the baby, who will be born dazed and unable to focus its eyes, often lasting for days.

In the hospital the laboring mother is usually hooked up to a fetal monitor which requires her to be lying in bed. "This supine position is the worst possible way to labor and to deliver a baby", reports Roberto Caldeyro-Marcia, M.D. Lying down during labor and birth can interfere with the supply of oxygen to the baby and does not make natural use of gravity, as does an upright or squatting position. However, the supine position is the most convenient position for the doctor and hospital staff.

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If the labor does not proceed according to the hospital's narrow definition of normal, the women may be given drugs to "speed" up her labor. There is a dangerous tendency in modern U.S. hospitals for one intervention to be followed soon by another and another, until the natural process of birth may be complicated by a series of interventions, often resulting in a cesarean.

Although most doctors who opt for cesarean are genuinely concerned about the safety of their patients, we cannot entirely discount the fact that doctors and hospitals profit far more from a cesarean than from a vaginal delivery. It is true that, in some cases, lives might have been lost if it had not been for the intervention of modern medicine and the technology needed to deal with emergency situations. But, it is also true that many lives have been lost or damaged due to unnecessary interventions in the natural birth process of a completely healthy women.

Who Controls Birth?

The woman, instinctively equipped with the knowledge of how to give birth, controls her own birth. "When you take away a woman's power, when you violate her ability to participate, when you treat her like a patient in the hospital, you mess up the way the birth is going to go and you make it impossible for her to have a low intervention, good outcome birth" says Laurie Friedman, Boston midwife.

Women birth as they live... what a woman thinks and feels and how she relates to her environment dramatically affects the course of her labor and birth. Many woman, in the United States are taught that birth is something to be frightened of. But a woman who understands birth, who trusts her body and who feels safe, can relax. Relaxation lets her labor go. It lets the body's natural pain killers flood. Pain is influenced by outward circumstances and other people. Pain is felt more unbearably by fear and when one is alone. In a darkened, quiet, protected space, with companions who are warm and supportive, she will labor effectively and pain (the background) will be suffused with a feeling of rightness, naturalness and power.

The ultimate control and care resides with the individual. Drugs and technology in birth, as in life, have proven to be poor substitutes for true human attention. Prevailing birth practices are disrespectful of nature. The emphasis on high-tech care is a disservice to those woman who don't require it. One assists a woman best not by separating her from her body, but by giving her every opportunity to become better acquainted with it. A midwife or labor assistant will put her energy into empowering and facilitating the woman to make her own choices.

Gentle birth occurs when families, friends and birth attendants place the needs of mother and baby as primary concern. When birthing women are allowed the freedom to control and give birth in their own way, in privacy, with respect and compassion, the healing of society will begin to take place.

Pregnancy, birth and the postpartum period are milestone events in the continuum of life. Whether positive or negative, these experiences profoundly affect women, babies, fathers, and families, and have important and long lasting effects on society. Healing the birth experience is a vital element in healing the way in which people think, behave and interact with one another for the rest of their lives.